

Minding Your Manners: Etiquette for a New Job

by Peter Roberts

Even though you may have had several interviews with your future employer before being hired, there is still uncertainty after you accept a new job (for example, as an associate at a law firm). This includes the uncertainty that the employer has about you, as well as your own uncertainty about the employer. Such uncertainty is perfectly natural. Beginning anything new is a learning experience for all parties involved.

Here are some suggestions as you prepare to assume your exciting new position (some etiquette-based, some simply practical):

On your first day, arrive 15 minutes early. Chat briefly with the receptionist after identifying yourself and then sit down. If the receptionist prolongs the chat, that is okay. Do not prolong the chat yourself. Be prepared to wait until the firm representative (human resources person, managing partner, your legal assistant, or someone else) comes for you. Try to be as relaxed as possible and maintain a smile.

The firm should have an orientation plan for you, unless you have previous experience working there as a summer associate or under contract. An orientation plan often includes interactions with several people to learn about the firm and its resources, policies, and procedures. It is only a start in getting you accustomed to the new office. You will continue to learn about in-house procedures over a period of time. Always ask what the procedure is before attempting anything new. For example, if you are about to draft a motion, ask if there is a master motion-template.

If you are simply shown to your office without an orientation, beware! You will need to change gears and take active steps to fulfill your need for information about how to get along at your new place of employment. This includes information about getting on the payroll, business cards, timesheets, after-hours staff support, the computer system, fringe benefits, using the telephone (including the long-distance code), master forms, and expense reimbursement, among other things.

A very important task is to get to know your legal assistant. Arrange quality time

(with minimal interruptions) for describing your background and for asking the legal assistant to share information about the firm, its procedures, and its culture. Listen carefully! Build mutual trust and respect. Remember your legal assistant's birthday or service anniversary with a lunch at a nice restaurant at your expense. Minimize conversations with others in front of your legal assistant's work area. It is a huge distraction and is inconsiderate. Remember that your legal assistant can come to your rescue in many ways.

Learn how to delegate tasks to your legal assistant. As a primary matter, ask your legal assistant how he or she prefers to communicate: by e-mail, in person, or by other means. You may also want to instruct him or her to avoid interrupting you at certain times, such as during telephone calls with clients. To properly delegate a task to an assistant:

- **Describe the task** in sufficient detail.
- **Describe “why” the task is necessary** (i.e., how it fits into the bigger picture).
- **Identify tools and resources** available to complete the task, if necessary.
- **Provide a deadline** for completion of the task.
- **Confirm** that your assistant understands what is expected of him or her.
- **Request that you be notified** immediately if there are obstacles to completion or large delays; encourage questions.
- **Request to be informed** when the task is completed — particularly when the task includes communication with outside parties.

Keep your office reasonably tidy. Piles on the floor and loose papers on the desk are warning signals to others that you are not very organized, and this disorder throws doubt on your work. It is true that the offices of the partners often have piles and loose papers, but remember that you are in the process of forming first impressions.

Do not always work behind a closed door. Keep the door open at least six inches if you need privacy. Closed doors signal not being approachable and/or a

wish to keep others away. When you do need to close your door (say, for a conference call on a speakerphone) tell your legal assistant why you are closing the door as a courtesy.

Leave the office at a reasonable hour each day. Staying too late on a consistent basis causes people to wonder: 1) do you waste time during the day? and 2) do you have a life? Be reasonably available for lunch and for office social activities, but do not feel obligated to participate in everything.

Keep your supervisor informed of your workload. Case review meetings are the best time to discuss this issue. Do not be shy. Once you establish yourself as a “can-do” person, you will have much more credibility when you indicate that you cannot fit another project into the requested timeframe. Ask for feedback about your work but do so at appropriate times. The best time is when your supervisor is able to respond without other distractions.

With respect to e-mail: Ask about your supervisor's e-mail preferences. You may not be permitted to e-mail a client until you have been introduced to the client. Learn to put passwords on PDFs and other electronic document attachments to help preserve confidentiality when you e-mail them.

Continually develop your writing skills. Be alert to opportunities to learn important business skills that a lawyer needs, such as project management; running effective meetings; proper methods for business development; and understanding the economic model of your law firm, public and private financial markets and institutions, financial statements, basic statistical analysis, and client industries.

Your initial experiences at your new law firm will shape you as a lawyer for the rest of your career. Develop the best habits possible — and remember, your legal assistant can “save your bacon”! ♦

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